A Pedagogy of the Senses: Lessons from Québec's Educational Past

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In the 1947-48 academic year, the typical daily schedule of a young student attending the minor seminary of the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, north of Montréal, was arranged as follows: wake-up at 5:15, followed by gymnastics at 5:45; prayer and study at 5:50, then daily mass at 6:40, followed by breakfast, housework and recreation until 8:15; first class at 8:15; recreation at 10 and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at 10:15; study at 10:30; 'spiritual lecture' at 11:45, followed by lunch and recreation until 1:35; 1:35 study and second class at 2:15; visit to the Blessed Sacrament, snack and recreation at 4; gymnastics at 4:20 and study at 4:35; rosary, supper and recreation from 6 to 7:50; more study at 8, followed by visits to the infirmary and showers at 8:30, and finally lights-out at 8:45. Tuesday mornings and Thursday afternoons were half-days off. The schedule for Sundays and special feast days was considerably lighter, though some time was built in for regular religious services and periods of study. (Bulletin no. 5, 1947-1948, *Le Juvénat Saint-Tharsicius de Terrebonne*, 25)

We can make some general observations about this rather daunting schedule. What strikes us at first is its comprehensive nature: every hour appears regulated to the utmost, and nothing seems left to chance. There clearly is a sense that young males need this almost military-type structure, especially if they are to develop into

the kinds of priests that the Congregation hopes will increase their numbers. The other thing that is immediately obvious is how the schedule is designed around a variety of somatic activities: gymnastics and recreation for the body, study and class time for the intellect, religious devotions and chapel time for the spirit and the religious sensibilities. There seems to be a strong pedagogical concern here with the formation of the "whole" person, a variation on the classic Jesuit educational strategy of "a sound mind in a healthy body." Finally, we can probably see in our mind's eye the ways in which the lives of generations of seminary students would have unfolded in such an intensely religious atmosphere, a place where the senses occupied a critically central place. Whether in the classroom or dormitory, the chapel or the playing field, the daily lives of these adolescents were deliberately structured in terms of what might be called "a pedagogy of the senses." This was a totalizing environment where the sights, sounds and smells of religious rituals and the presence of religious models of masculine behaviour were palpably present.

Minor seminaries and such private boarding schools for boys were found throughout the Catholic world in the 19th and early-20th centuries, but in Québec they occupied a rather privileged position. Their specific purpose was to nurture and train Catholic boys, from as young as 12 or 13, for the priesthood or, in some cases, for the so-called bourgeois liberal professions, such as medicine or law. In a recent collection of essays on these private boarding schools (*Le collège classique*

pour garçons: études historiques sur une institution québécoise disparue, 2014), the authors point out that these institutions were not monolithic, and that they were reflective of specific class concerns and socio-economic interests. Moreover, they were instrumental in the propagation and inculcation of certain understandings of what it meant to be a man in relationship with other men (and also to the exclusion of women)—these relationships being subjected, in turn, to a variety of types of surveillance and control. In keeping with Michel Foucault's important work on regulatory institutions such as prisons or asylums, it could be argued that these minor seminaries and other boarding schools for boys, as rigidly structured as they were, became privileged sites for the deployment of power and discipline in the intensive socialization of young clerical vocations. Adolescence, in particular that of males, has often been scripted as being culturally problematic. In this closed Catholic world of seminaries and boarding schools, religious devotion would have often been framed in terms of its regulatory potential. The senses were certainly critical to this process; they were the gateway—the means—through which proper Catholic, masculine and emerging clerical bodies could be molded. Through their pedagogy, these boarding schools proposed particular "ways of sensing;" that is, specific means for the deployment and the control of the students' sensual worlds.

The schedule was constructed around two major clusters of activity: the first and most important were the religious-type activities, and the second was class and

study time. In this particular minor seminary, the concern with the regulation and modelling of behaviour through a pedagogy of the senses would have been most evident in the central religious space: that of the chapel, the place where the daily performance of devotional piety was manifested. The especially lush decoration of this chapel space, arranged as it was with a large variety of Eucharistic images and symbols, aptly and succinctly summarized the virtues that the seminary authorities expected of their young charges. It was above all meant to stir and to excite the senses, to instill in the student-seminarians a sense of the very special grandeur and glory of their calling as future Blessed Sacrament religious. Equally important was the specifically educational work of learning and study. This would have been one of the primary sites of sensual development and discipline. In this space associated with the work of the mind, the students would have been 'conditioned' and formed in a variety of ways, whether through course material and content, but also through such traditional pedagogical techniques as memorization, and forms of self-control and even ostracism. It is here that the concern with the regulation of male bodies would have been seen as most problematic, but also as most effective.

Anthropologist of the senses David Howes writes: "The term 'ways of sensing' (…) underscores the plurality of sensory practices in different cultures and historical periods (…) and the processual nature of perception (…). We also intend the term to draw attention to the manifold relations among the different

senses, which can be called 'intersensoriality' (…) Equally significant to the ways in which the senses are practiced are the ways in which a society decides that they should *not* be used: when and what we must not see, or touch, or taste. (…) in certain cases (…) ways of seeing are also ways of not touching. Then let us consider (…) what such constraints signify, how they arose, what sensory and social formations they favour and what information they withhold." (*Ways of Sensing: Understanding the senses in Society* 2014, 5) It is this delicate and often unspoken tension between the proper practice of the senses and the constraints that were imposed upon them that interest us most here: in other words, the multiplicity of ways—through schedules, activities, environments, imagery, and all manner of rules and regulations—that these seminaries and boarding schools were best able to construct a religiously sanctioned pedagogy of the senses for young males.

We have noted how the format and grind of the daily schedule worked both to structure and to circumscribe the students' experience of their sensual world. In fact, this world was fairly self-contained; it began and ended at the seminary walls, whether real or imagined. Though the schedule was the primary means through which this sensualized world was arranged and controlled, other features were also important. Here we turn to a consideration of the stated values of the institution, and hence those qualities and attributes that were considered highly desirable in its future students but also future priests for the church. These values were not simply

grandiose ideals expressed in beautiful prose in the school's publicity material. In fact, they would have undergirded all of the school's life, whether its curriculum, its extra-curricular activities, its liturgical life, or its broader sense of identity.

The qualities identified as being essential for study at the Blessed Sacrament minor seminary are classified in terms of four aptitudes: the first, and no doubt the most important, **belonging to a good Christian (read Catholic) family** (here, the family is presented as the best 'garden' for the seeding of priestly vocations, in the presence of a 'virtuously virile' father and a 'chaste and pious' mother); **physical aptitudes** (good health, and without "physical or mental infirmity"); **intellectual aptitudes** (some of the qualities listed are talent, willingness, sufficient education for pursuing the study of Latin, sound judgement, and a 'good spirit'); **moral aptitudes** (this is characterized by such terms as having a sound character, docility, obedience, love of God and of souls, piety, purity of morals, and having a fair and serious disposition). (Bulletin no. 5, 19-20)

The three sets of aptitudes—physical, intellectual and moral—highlight the assets considered indispensable in the formation of the character of a future priest. They are also tied to a logic of exclusion, in that they affirm the proper exercise of the physical senses for legitimate ends, as well as the implicit rejection of their opposites. Take the notions of 'virtuous virility' or of 'purity of morals.' Clearly, these suggest an ideal of self-control and religious and moral uprightness, but they

also exclude—forbid even—any sense of impurity, adulteration or some use of the body in a manner considered indecent or lewd. For young males, this entails key notions of willpower and restraint; control of the senses would be indispensable to this process of auto-regulation. The same method would apply in the case of other desirable qualities, such as good health, piety, obedience or docility. These were grounded in a conception of sensual restraint and discipline, and it was the school's primary role—through its physical, religious and academic environment, as well as the wide-ranging pedagogical principles it espoused—to ensure that such qualities were successfully inculcated in its charges. The type of sensual pedagogy thereby produced was characterized by its holistic quality. If we apply David Howes' notion of 'intersensoriality,' we could say that the full gamut of bodily senses was here forced to rally in defence of a higher religious ideal. This is not uncommon in the case of closed religious groups, as made eloquently evident in recent studies of women's religious communities in the early modern era. (N. Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600-1800: Early Modern 'Convents of Pleasure,'* 2013).

There was undoubtedly some pleasure to be found in this disciplining of the senses in the grand and noble cause of becoming a religious virtuoso. One of the modestly surprising and rather endearing features of the recollections of former seminarians about their time in these schools, despite the strict disciplinary ethos that prevailed in them, is how they were gratified by having their bodies and their

minds forged and tamed, through a process of concentrated effort, in service to a higher cause. Scholars have remarked, however, how this was not only a religious ideal and enterprise, but also a bourgeois one. These values were primarily class-bound, serving as they did the interests and preservation of patriarchal privilege (see *Le collège classique pour garçons*, 149-181). Though these boarding schools claimed for themselves an educational mission that was broad-based in its appeal and orientation, there was little doubt that they were forming the lay and clerical elite of the society in which they found themselves.

As with any educational institution, gender was at play, and the construction of standards of masculinity was an important consideration in the amplification and implementation of a pedagogy of the senses. Men were being formed, but not just any ordinary sort of men: men who, in fact, were able to control their senses, and moreover domesticate them for a higher, nobler purpose. Such moderation and restraint marked one as a 'true' man in the hegemonic sense of the term. Canons of masculinity of the early- to mid-20th century espoused a concern with the senses as the means through which manliness and virility could be put on display, whether in religious/clerical or in secular ways. Senses were displayed, as it were, <u>in their non-display</u>, or through their very lack of deployment. As Foucault reminds us, silence does not serve to hide, but rather to expose. In the sensual pedagogy of Québec seminaries and boarding schools, sensual silence spoke quite intelligibly.